



A Viennese writer chronicles American foodways



KATHERINE TAYLOR FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Ursula Schersch, an Austrian food writer and journalist living in Boston for now, writes a column about American food for a Viennese newspaper.

By Jane Dornbusch

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CAMBRIDGE — Ursula Schersch isn't an anthropologist or a culinary historian by training, but she's become a bit of both since relocating from Vienna to the Boston area a little over a year ago.

Back home, Schersch, 32, worked as a journalist, covering food and lifestyle stories. When her fiancé (now her husband), David Krejci, got a postdoc position at MIT in the Space Propulsion Lab, Schersch — an enthusiastic traveler — was game to come along and

undertake a serious, if informal, study of American foodways. She began writing a regular column for *Der Standard*, a Viennese daily, in which she presents American dishes and recipes to an Austrian audience.

It's been eye-opening for both Schersch and her readers. "I never heard of sloppy Joes before I came here," she says, naming a dish she's explored in her column. She wasn't sure, at first, how receptive Viennese readers would be. But to her surprise, reaction has been "great," with online recipes for such exotica as nachos, clam chowder, and Louisiana gumbo garnering reader comments numbering in the hundreds, most of them positive. (A quick glance finds the phrase "gut geschmeckt" ("tasted good") showing up frequently in the comments.)

Schersch's methods are simple. "I go to restaurants and pick a dish people in Austria don't know, or don't know as well," she says. Then she re-creates the food at home. Before presenting the gumbo recipe, she says, "I tried it in several restaurants. I'm an excessive recipe tester; I'm really picky about it. I try it 10 times or more, and when I think I've got the recipe right, I publish it."

But her culinary diplomacy travels in both directions. In addition to her column, "USA EssBar," which translates to something like "Edible USA," Schersch writes for her own blog,

LilVienna.com, which evokes, tongue firmly in cheek, a vision of a mythical ethnic neighborhood in Boston that features Austrian food. As she describes it on the blog, "There should be a Little Vienna, everywhere. It's all artsy style, messy in a good way. It's kind of European (but not too much); it's a place to stroll through the cobblestone streets and let the day pass by in a patio cafe." Sound good? It gets better: "Food served in Little Vienna is apple strudel and schnitzel, and real brown bread, and wurst with sauerkraut." It makes the reader want to buy a ticket.

The blog offers recipes for such Mitteleuropean fare as that strudel, Austrian potato salad, potato goulash, semolina dumpling soup, cheese spaetzle, and vanilla crescents.

Schersch's instructions seem to vacillate between tablespoons and cups or grams — the consequence, probably, of having a foot on two continents. She photographs each step of the recipes herself with striking lighting, using a Canon 7D camera, usually with a fixed focal length (50 mm) lens. Self-taught, Schersch started shooting about eight years ago,

when she was a lifestyle reporter for *Der Standard*. Her step-by-step photos help readers feel they can tackle the dishes with confidence.

Schersch grew up on a small organic farm in Micheldorf, a couple of hours southwest of Vienna, and habits of good eating were instilled early. Her father worked full time as a farmer, doing some carpentry on the side (he built the family kitchen); her mother worked as a tour guide. Schersch is the second of their three daughters. The farm had a few cows and chickens, and a huge garden that supplied nearly all their fruits and vegetables. Three generations lived under one roof: Her mother's mother, now 94, was part of the household, and her paternal grandparents, also farmers, were in a village nearby. That, she says, gave her "a chance to know all the specialties Austria is famous for. I grew up stretching strudel dough and flipping palatschinken [crepes] from a young age."

The kitchen her father built also set the stage for learning traditional dishes. "It has a big table where we all eat, and lots of counter space, but the most special part is the stove," Schersch says. It's a big wood-burning beauty with a huge cooktop large enough, she estimates, to accommodate 10 pots. The parts directly above the firebox are hottest, and those farther from it are good for keeping food warm. "You control the heat in your pot," she says, "by changing its position." It also has an oven. Her mother — and *her* mother before her — would light the stove every day at noon for regular cooking throughout the day; only rarely was the modern electric oven used. "These kinds of stoves were once typical for old farmhouses," says Schersch, but keeping them supplied with logs is a lot of work. Most locals have now traded the wood-burning models for conventional ranges. "Even a lot of Austrians are impressed when they see this stove for the first time," she says.

On a recent Friday morning, in the small, bright Cambridge apartment she shares with Krejci, Schersch is making buchteln, rich, tender buns enclosing a filling of apricot jam. They might be served with afternoon coffee, Schersch says, or in a traditional Austrian restaurant for dessert, set on a vanilla sauce.

It's a dish her mother and grandmother used to make, and, like much of their cooking, it is labor-intensive. "This takes hours to make," Schersch notes, adding that when her mother and grandmother formed the dough balls, they'd "come out perfect." Although time-consuming, making buchteln is not that difficult.

With a practiced touch, Schersch turns out the yeast dough she's prepared beforehand onto a floured surface and rolls it into a log, then cuts the log into 12 portions. One at a time, she rolls each portion into a ball, flattens each ball into a circle, and spoons a bit of jam in the center. "Not too much," she cautions, "or it's hard to pinch." That, she maintains, is the only truly tricky part: forming the dough around the jam and sealing it tight, then rolling it into a ball with a firm but gentle touch.

The filled buns are coated with melted butter and set snugly into a baking dish, to meld into a pull-apart treat. Properly made, as Schersch's surely are, buchteln are crusty on the outside, light and fluffy inside, and not overly sweet.

Although Schersch says she misses the foods of home — "comfort food, goulash, things like that" — she has found much to enjoy and admire on tables here. "I really love classic American cuisine," she says.

And she's a quick study: At the height of tomato season, her suggested recipe in USA Essbar was "tomatenketchup." The verdict of one reader who attempted it? "Es schmeckt lecker." ("It tastes delicious.")

How to make buchteln, Viennese buns with apricot jam.

[See the full recipe here.](#)



The dough rises in a mixing bowl.



Rolled into a log, it is cut into 12 pieces.



Each piece has its edges tucked in a few times to form a ball.



The ball is flattened into a circle, and apricot jam is placed at the center.



The dough is wrapped around the filling and pinched closed.



The buns are placed in a dish and baked. After they cool, they are dusted with confectioners' sugar and served.



For the full recipe click [here](#):

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